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ABSTRACT

Between 1979 and 1987, there was a 73% increase in the number of students transferring from two-year colleges to universities in Alberta (Canada). Three recent studies investigated this rapid growth. The first study, conducted over a three-year period, explored whether a group of 50 transfer students were sufficiently prepared to succeed academically after transfer. The second study explored attrition-related student characteristics. The third transfer study involved 1,081 transfer students from Alberta colleges and sought to identify variables related to student satisfaction and success in transfer programs. Findings from the three studies indicated the following: (1) students who entered a general diploma program and decided to transfer tended to be two years older than the average baccalaureate student, married, have weaker academic backgrounds, and be less confident about their prospects for program completion; (2) transfer students perceived their college experience in a positive light; (3) two-year college students were apprehensive about their pending transfer and concerned about surviving in a more competitive and less personal environment; (4) in general, students reported less satisfaction with their university experiences than with their college experiences; and (5) about half of the transfer students maintained their college grade point average while half experienced a decline of about one grade point. A 33-item bibliography is included. (WJT)

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College-to-University Transfer: Status and Issues in Alberta

A paper presented at
the annual conference of
The Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education

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College-to-University Transfer: Status and Issues in Alberta

For 30 years Alberta colleges and universities have endeavored to define a workable system of transfer education. While transfer in Alberta resembles transfer in other postsecondary systems, it also exhibits distinctive characteristics. A synthesis of major conclusions from three recent studies about transfer includes: Students report higher satisfaction with their college experiences and lower satisfaction with their university experiences, the psychological transition to "university student" tends to occur before the end of the first university term, and at university, students are career directed and find social support among other transfer students.

Several policy issues about transfer in Alberta are identified. Among several issues identified for further investigation is a broad policy question: What are the consequences to the postsecondary system of transfer, and what amount of transfer is desirable (or tolerable) within a provincial or an interprovincial postsecondary system?

College-to-University Transfer: Status and Issues in Alberta

Canadian higher education tends to restrict the transfer function of community colleges. Three of the ten provinces - Alberta, British Columbia, and Quebec - however, have systematically included transfer programs in colleges. In the Canadian context, the term college is generally reserved for two-year postsecondary institutions that do not grant degrees. The transfer of students from college to university has been a subject of debate in Alberta since the introduction of the first public college in Lethbridge in 1957. Over the past 30 years, as the public college sector has matured and grown to 11 institutions, the transfer function has become a firmly established component of the majority - but not all - of the colleges. It is true that nearly all public colleges have expressed the desire, at one time or another, to offer a formal transfer program - i.e. first- and second-year university courses. However, in order to do so, two conditions must be met. One condition is the approval of the provincial Department of Advanced Education, which controls all college programs through the Program Co-ordination Policy, as well as through the budgetary approval process; the other is the acceptance of such courses for credit by the University of Alberta (or another Alberta university). While these two conditions seem perfectly reasonable at face value, operationally they have been difficult to manage - especially from the perspective of the colleges. However, this paper does not set out to describe the evolution of provincial transfer policy; this has been documented elsewhere (e.g., Long, 1979; & Small, 1972). Rather, it attempts to examine transfer as a developing function in Alberta, one which is anticipated to grow in importance in a system which has embraced the principle of equity of access for all who are qualified and wish to participate in degree studies. While the context of the paper is Alberta, the conclusions may be relevant to other provincial systems where similar transfer arrangements are in place or under consideration.

The paper comprises four sections: first, a brief history and update of transfer in Alberta provides a backdrop for three recent studies; second, these studies are reviewed; third, conclusions about transfer are drawn; and, finally, issues arising from these discussions are considered.

Transfer in Alberta

Transfer education in Alberta has its contemporary roots in the Public Junior Colleges Act of 1958. This Act provided a general framework for the establishment of public junior colleges and set out the relationship of colleges to the University of Alberta (Campbell, 1974). Essentially, the University was empowered to control college transfer through the right to approve instructors and to determine curricula, examinations, and admission standards to these courses. Long (1979) pointed out that, under the Act, colleges could not operate "as comprehensive community college[s] - that is as institution[s] offering career and occupational studies along with university transfer courses - without University affiliation" (p. 37).

Lethbridge Junior College was created in 1957, predating the Act by one year. Over the next few years, two other junior colleges--Red Deer College and Medicine Hat College--were established, and a private college in Calgary--Mount Royal College--was converted to public status. These three colleges sought and obtained affiliation with the University of Alberta in order to offer transfer programs. Within this same time-frame, the Calgary campus of the University of Alberta became the independent University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge was created (Berghofer & Vladicka, 1980). By the mid-1960s, college expansion and university development had produced a host of administrative complexities and concerns for colleges, universities, and government. A

clearer sense of direction and rules of procedure were badly needed, a condition which ushered in a new Act.

The Colleges Act of 1969 made provisions for college boards of governors and renamed junior colleges as public colleges. An Alberta Colleges Commission was established (later to be dissolved in 1973 as part of the restructuring which brought into existence the Department of Advanced Education) to act as a liaison body between colleges and government, and between the college system and the university system. The new Act removed the requirement that public colleges offering university transfer programs be affiliated with a university, though universities retained the right of transfer course approval for credit.

While structures and functions of the college system and the university system may have appeared to be separate and distinct, they were inevitably and forever linked by transfer arrangements. Conflicts escalated during the early 1970s because of the contradictory views of colleges either as autonomous institutions with their own unique mandates, or as junior partners to the universities. According to Long (1979), the transferability issue remained volatile until 1974.

In September 1974, with the support of the Universities Coordinating Council and the presidents of institutions of higher education in Alberta, the Minister of Advanced Education announced the establishment of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT). The primary goal of ACAT is to provide leadership and direction in the improvement and enlargement of educational opportunities for Alberta students through inter-institutional transfer. The Council's first undertaking was to prepare and publish a *Provincial Transfer Guide* for the 1976-1977 academic year. The guide, now published

annually, details the current status of negotiated arrangements between colleges and universities in the province (Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer, 1988).

As the public colleges of Alberta have evolved, the transfer function has become firmly institutionalized: No college has given up this function, and others have sought to expand it in response to public demand. Grant MacEwan Community College is a case in point. Since its inception in Edmonton in 1970, GMCC has aspired to offer a formal transfer program; until recently, however, the Department of Advanced Education has demurred, on the grounds that the University of Alberta could handle the demand for degree-level studies. The argument that a collegiate environment provides an alternative, more intimate milieu for baccalaureate studies did not convince the government. GMCC has maneuvered around this position by offering a two-year diploma in "General Arts and Sciences" and by negotiating transfer credits, on a course-by-course basis, with the University of Alberta.

Transfer as a phenomenon has grown continuously: Between 1979 and 1987 there was a 73% increase in the numbers of students transferring to Alberta postsecondary institutions. Transfer *within* the province increased dramatically, while transfer *into* Alberta grew slightly during the eight-year period. Although most transfers were from colleges to universities (63% in 1987), increases in other transfer patterns, such as from university to college, have also occurred (Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer, 1988).

Two recent developments in the Edmonton region indicate significant changes in provisions for access to degree studies. First, the University of Alberta, Canada's second largest university, published its planning study, *The Next Decade And Beyond* (1987), whose anticipated goals included increasing the proportion of graduate students from the

present 10% to 20% by the end of the 1990s. In order to achieve this while maintaining present enrolment levels, the University recognizes the need to reduce its undergraduate student population. Second, in a commensurate move, the provincial government approved a formal transfer program for Grant MacEwan Community College, along with plans for the construction of a \$100 million new campus.

Perhaps of even greater significance, in terms of impact upon the established system for providing degree studies, is the recent (and relatively sudden) authorization of three private, church-related colleges--with a fourth pending--to offer full degree programs in Arts and Sciences. This development has occurred under the aegis of the Private Colleges Accreditation Board, which was created in 1984 to facilitate, monitor, and control the extension of degree-granting status to private colleges that previously were affiliated with the University of Alberta. The loosening of a previously tightly confined function of degree programming has reawakened sentiments which have lain dormant since the college system was created in the 1960s - for example, interest in degree-granting status among certain public colleges which have strong transfer traditions, most notably Medicine Hat College and Red Deer College (Lau, 1988; Strickland, 1988).

Three Recent Alberta Studies

It is in this rather turbulent environment that the studies reported below were conducted. A brief overview of the purpose and methodology of each study is presented.

Grant MacEwan Community College / University of Alberta Study

Both GMCC and the University of Alberta are located in Edmonton, Alberta's capital city whose population is one half million. In 1983 GMCC, while lacking a formally

sanctioned transfer program, was offering first- and second-year university courses as part of its comprehensive programming. The University of Alberta, however, had agreed to accept only first-year courses for transfer, arguing that the College's clientele was not a typical transfer-student body, the College not having been established for that purpose. The University held that the orientation of the College's instructors did not guarantee the academic quality required in second-year studies. The issue became contentious between the two institutions, and the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer was unable to negotiate a resolution. The impasse was broken with an agreement that the University would accept second-year transfer courses for a trial period of three years, on condition that the progress of the students after transfer be monitored.

The resulting study (Small & Konrad, 1986) focussed on those 50 students in three annual cohorts who completed one or more second-year university-level courses at GMCC before registering at the University of Alberta. The basic question was whether they were sufficiently prepared to maintain a satisfactory level of achievement after transfer. Questionnaire, extensive interview, and outcome data were gathered over a three-year period, as well as similar data from a comparative sample of regular University of Alberta students. Salient findings from the GMCC study are integrated with findings from the other two studies in "Conclusions."

Red Deer College Study

Red Deer College is located halfway between Alberta's principal cities of Edmonton and Calgary in a community of 30,000 persons. A second study (Tyler, 1988) followed a cohort of students at Red Deer College as they reached the end of a two-year transfer program. The principal purpose of the study was to explore attrition-related factors in the

transition phase from college to university. More specifically, it set out (a) to examine the characteristics of Red Deer College transfer students; (b) to determine the attrition rate and related student perceptions; and (c) to identify differences between "persisters" and "non-persisters."

In March 1987, questionnaires were mailed to 244 students in the second year of the transfer program at the college, to which 65.5% responded. Information which prior research had identified as influencing persistence - including background characteristics, academic integration, intentions and goals, environmental factors and transfer difficulties - was gathered. A short follow-up questionnaire was mailed to respondents in October 1987, producing a response rate of 97%. Persisters were identified as those indicating that they had enrolled in a university or were continuing their studies at the College. The questionnaire elicited perceptions of transfer experiences or, in the case of non-persisters, sought reasons for discontinuance.

General Transfer to The University of Alberta

A third transfer study (Vaala, 1988; Vaala & Holdaway, 1989) involved a cohort of 1081 students who transferred from any of 14 Alberta colleges (public and private) to the University of Alberta in 1986. This investigation sought to identify variables most closely related to student satisfaction and success in transfer programs. Student perceptions about experiences at college and at university were collected from a sample of students during the fall of 1987 and winter of 1988, using questionnaires. A response rate of 67.3% was obtained. Follow up interviews were conducted after analysis of questionnaire data, in order to clarify and enrich findings with anecdotal accounts.

Among the groups of variables whose relationship to success and satisfaction were investigated included: type and location of college attended, friendships among peers, informal contacts with faculty members, and a focus on the goal of intellectual development. Analysis revealed clusters of student characteristics which were associated with aspects of satisfaction and/or success at either college, university, or both.

Conclusions

The relationship among the three studies and the conclusions which can be drawn from them are not immediately evident. However, interpretation may be facilitated by a systems concept of student flow. For example, in a transfer program, students have certain entering characteristics as they embark upon their postsecondary studies. Secondly, their first experiences occur in the college context, and at some point they enter a transition phase. Then follows an experience at university, and, finally, the whole process produces certain outcomes. Data relevant to each phase of student flow are synthesized from the studies. The conclusions which follow are coded to identify the studies on which they are based, that is, GMCC, RDC, and U of A.

Entering characteristics. Students who enter formal transfer programs tend to be typical baccalaureate students in age, marital status, sex, high-school background, academic standing, goal-focus, and expectations for their academic careers (RDC, U of A). There is some evidence, however, that students who enter a general diploma program and subsequently decide to transfer are about two years older, more likely to be married, have weaker academic backgrounds, and are less confident about their prospects for program completion (GMCC).

College experiences. There is strong evidence to suggest that transfer students are socialized to college norms and perceive their college years in a very positive light, irrespective of academic standing or other measures of success such as course credits earned or credits transferred (GMCC, RDC, U of A). Students generally speak in glowing terms about their relationships with peers and instructors; they are well integrated into the college environment, expressing satisfaction with the more intimate atmosphere and the considerable time spent in college-related activities (GMCC, RDC, U of A).

Transition experiences. College students tend to view their pending transfer to university with apprehension, being concerned about surviving in a more competitive and less personal environment (GMCC, RDC). They worry about finding their way around the larger campus and coping financially with the extra costs of living away from home; at the same time, they hold to their academic goals and express confidence in their ability to succeed (GMCC, RDC, U of A). It appears that before transferring, students have a normal and healthy sense of what lies ahead for them and do not appear to be neurotic in their fears (GMCC, RDC).

While most students do encounter some adjustment problems, they tend to overcome them more easily than expected, making the physical and psychological transition to "university student" during the first term (RDC, U of A). Obtaining feedback about academic performance (e.g., through mid-term marks) appears to be a significant watershed in this adjustment process (U of A). Difficulties in securing transfer credits do arise - even with a clear statement of the transferability of courses - suggesting that more guidance at college with regard to course selection is warranted (RDC, U of A).

University experiences. At university, students appear to place increased emphasis on program completion, as opposed to social activities, in anticipation of establishing the

basis for a career (U of A). Some students take course overloads or register in spring or summer in order to compensate for credit losses during transfer (U of A). On the other hand, there is a tendency for students to maintain patterns established at college-- for example, part-time attendance (GMCC). Likewise, students with a record of activity in college life are most likely to be involved in university affairs (RDC). Many students, however, experience difficulties in making new friends; they tend to rely upon other transfer students for social support and program information (RDC, U of A).

In general, students report significantly less satisfaction with their university experiences than with their college experiences (GMCC, U of A). Also, regular university students and transfer students appear to hold similar perceptions of the university (GMCC), adding further credence to the existence of real qualitative differences in institutional environments.

Outcomes. Outcomes from university tend to be continuous with achievements at college. University grades resemble college grades - but are lower (GMCC, U of A). About half of the students maintain their grades, and half experience a decline of about one grade-point (GMCC). Once established, the new grade levels tend to be maintained. Generally, transferring students report an average decline after a year at university of about 0.5 GPA (GMCC, U of A).

Student satisfaction as a measure of outcomes presents a very favorable picture of transfer in Alberta. Regardless of whether students persist in their studies, step out for a time, drop out permanently, achieve at about the same level, or decline in performance, students generally feel satisfied with their decision to start their studies at a college and would recommend a similar attendance pattern to a friend (GMCC, RDC, U of A).

Discussion

Findings from these three studies confirm, extend, or question assertions from other sources about transfer as a process and about transfer students. Research has shown that attendance patterns vary widely (e.g., Bean, 1986, p. 48; Pantages & Creedon, 1978, pp. 51-53; Spady, 1970, p. 65; & Tinto, 1975, p. 89, & 1982, p. 3). Among the variations is a trend towards extending the time-frame: Hilton (1982) found that fewer than 25% of contemporary students continue their studies without interruption, that is, without stopping out. While various patterns of attendance are evident among Alberta transfer students, no marked deviations from traditional patterns were found - certainly nothing of the order reported by Hilton. Most transfer students in Alberta enter college directly from high school and proceed to university within one year of completing their last college course. There are relatively few mature adult students in transfer programs. Reasons for this are speculative and may reflect a lack of interest on the part of adults or the existence of certain institutional barriers to participation.

Cross (1968), Dennison and Jones (1970), and Remley and Stripling (1983), among others, have identified credit loss as a major problem for transfer students. During the 1970s considerable progress in articulation of programs has occurred both in Alberta and elsewhere. Nevertheless, after more than a decade of provincial coordination of transfer, students continue to encounter credit problems. The source may be system arrangements or college-level counselling. In either case, reasons need to be explored. But the ultimate responsibility rests with the transfer students, who must be assiduous in course selection in college in order to avoid later frustrations in obtaining the transfer credits to which they feel entitled.

Fetters (1977) noted that transfer students withdrew more frequently than did regular four-year students, suggesting that dysfunctionalities might exist in transfer programs. Also, Stoll and Scarff (1983) found that male students were more likely than female students to withdraw. Contrary to these findings, the Alberta studies found no evidence of high levels of withdrawal from transfer programs before, during, or after transfer. When students did withdraw, they explained their actions as "stepping out" rather than as "dropping out," and attributed their decisions more to personal circumstances than to dissatisfactions with aspects of their programs. Also, no differences between males and females in withdrawal patterns were found.

Hills (1965) reviewed studies conducted from 1928 to 1964 on student transfer and suggested that transfer students could expect to suffer an appreciable grade drop in the first semester after transfer. Subsequently, Anderson and Beers (1980), Harmon (1976), and Kissler (1982) found evidence that community college transfer students performed less well than did regular students. The drop in grades was attributed to a phenomenon known as "transfer shock." The grades of Alberta transfer students also dropped about 0.5 grade points and tended to remain at the new level once it was established. Thus, transfer shock may be more than a temporary set-back caused by a change of scene, suggesting that steps should be taken to reduce the probability of falling grades, perhaps by adjusting college grades to bring them more in line with university standards. At the same time, it should be noted that not all transferring students have academic backgrounds comparable to students who attend university only.

Students entering formal transfer programs do not appear to be substantially different from students who enter university directly. However, there appear to be some differences between transfer students and other students at college. Students who enter diploma programs at college, as a group, have lower average high school marks than

students who enter transfer programs and universities directly. This conclusion is not surprising and serves to substantiate the notion that college study in diploma programs provides access to university for some students. The effects of this heterogeneous college environment on transfer students warrant further study.

The finding that students are more satisfied both with the climate and the academic nurturing of colleges than that of universities should come as no surprise to adherents of community college education. Since the establishment of junior colleges in the United States, the claim has been made that they offer a more humane and personalized environment for all comers (e.g., Gleazer, 1980, pp. 9, 10). Just as colleges have been admonished to bring college grades more in line with university grades, the present finding on institutional environment calls on universities to emulate colleges. How this might be done is a challenging question for researchers and theorists. Perhaps a second look should be taken at the college as a unit of organization within universities. This is a structure typical of medieval universities and still be found in some contemporary universities in Britain and the United States.

Transfer programs are generally effective in preparing students for degree completion at university, and transfer students are satisfied with their decision to attend college first--and would recommend that pattern to a friend. Moreover, most transfer students would prefer to complete their degrees at the local college, were this possible. Transfer students tend to view transfer to university as an inevitability rather than as an opportunity to branch out, and they have apprehensions about the process. Hendel, Teal, and Benjamin (1983) found that student apprehension rises sharply in the period preceding transfer but is likely to lessen considerably once transfer has occurred. Similarly, in Alberta, most transfer students found that their fears were groundless. College and university officials might reflect on this conclusion to discover ways to extend the positive

sentiments developed in college into similar feelings about university. This might be done through more collaborative activities while the transfer students are at college, such as inter-institutional sports, clubs, and campus visits.

These findings touch on broad issues of accessibility - how programs are articulated among institutions as well as which types of institutions should receive approval to offer degree-level studies. These issues are refocussed in the following questions:

- * Should degree-granting private colleges with transfer programs still be required to maintain an affiliation relationship with an Alberta university?
- * Should public colleges be allowed to provide full degree programs?
- * Should third-year transfer be permitted?
- * Should transfer programs be expanded in Alberta to colleges which at present do not have them?
- * Should the transfer function be extended in Alberta to the institutes of technology?
- * Should provinces which do not have full transfer programs consider instituting such programs?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these questions, but the direction indicated from this research is towards more institutional discretion in major programming matters within an open and competitive system that places first priority on serving the needs of its target clientele. This certainly appears to be the prevailing philosophy in Alberta.

Also, two substantial transfer questions arise of potential interest to researchers. The first deals with the variables influencing students' decisions about choice of access route. Little appears to be known about student motivation behind various attendance patterns and about the nature of resulting student experiences. For example, Dennison's (1978) finding that only about half of the students enrolled in university transfer courses at

British Columbia colleges actually intended to transfer to a university hints that there may be a cluster of variables related to institutional choice and program continuation. This is a promising area of inquiry for phenomenologists. The second involves a broad question about the outcomes of transfer within a postsecondary system. The opportunities for transfer have an effect--though largely unmeasured--on diversity and accessibility within the postsecondary system. This complex question may be stated in this way: What are the consequences to the postsecondary system of transfer, and what amount of transfer is desirable (or tolerable) within a provincial or an interprovincial postsecondary system?

Context for the Future

Despite nearly a decade and a half of provincial and institutional policies to articulate transfer, it appears that "final solutions" have not yet emerged in Alberta. Transferability has evolved into a major higher education policy issue as new degree authorizations have been announced and as admission and quota requirements have changed. The 1990s will be a time of policy review, reaffirmation, and/or change in response to changing social policy on access.

In other Canadian provinces where transfer has been encouraged or allowed, similar reflection is occurring. However, geographic, demographic, and institutional differences between provincial systems have militated against developing comparable policy-relevant data. Also, there have been no systematic interprovincial approaches to the study of transfer which might help to establish understandings of a Canadian tradition.

Clearly there is a need for identifying important transfer issues and generating useful information about transfer. This paper is an invitation to dialogue about transfer in

Canada. Postsecondary systems in all provinces are experiencing increased pressures to enhance student mobility among institutions within and between provincial boundaries. As our changing society places increased demands on postsecondary institutions in the coming decades, one major response to these demands will likely be a focus on increasing transfer opportunities. Across Canada, there has been a broad, rich experience in dealing with issues surrounding transfer arrangements. It is essential to develop greater understandings of this experience and find appropriate means to apply these understandings in resolving emergent transfer issues.

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